

ROBERT MOFFATT: THE KING'S GARDENER IN AFRICA

March 12, 2007 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following biographical sketch is from *Heroes of Faith on Pioneer Trails* by E. Myers Harrison, former pastor of Judson College Church, Rangoon, Burma; copyright 1945 by Moody Bible Institute. These are excellent stories to read in family devotions or to use in other contexts with children. It is important to keep the Greatest Work on Earth, which is missionary work, before our children and youth and to pray that the Lord will send forth laborers into His harvest. The essence of fruitful Christian living is death to self and surrender to God's will, and few things exhibit this more powerfully than sacrificial missionary work. Sadly, very few Bible believing Christians today are familiar with the challenging stories of influential pioneer missionaries of past days.

In a native cart drawn by several yoke of oxen, accompanied by three native servants, a young white man of athletic build and striking features sets out across an unbroken desert in Africa. After traveling all night and part of the next day, the party comes to a "water hole," but not a drop of water is to be found! The heat is terrific but they continue the trek through a wilderness where not a blade of green grass and scarcely a bush is to be seen. The next day the temperature is 118 degrees in the shade but there is no shade! The supply of water carried in the cart has been exhausted. Tormented by thirst and frantic because the deep sand burns their hoofs like a red hot stove, most of the oxen break loose and rush madly toward the mountains. One of the black men goes in pursuit, but returns about midnight, fleeing from lions and crying for water. Digging frantically, they find a tiny spring and secure partial relief for their thirst. But with the food supply practically exhausted and the water supply less than a trickle, Robert (that being the white man's name) sends two men with the remaining oxen in search of supplies.

Soon they are lost to sight in a cloud of dust. Three days later Robert realizes that his situation is perilous in the extreme. Hunger, thirst, heat, and the monstrous desolation seem enough to drive one mad. And what of the two men who went seeking help? Have they perished in the desert? Is death in the desert, on his very first journey, to be the end of his dream of planting a Garden for God in Africa?

The Most precious article in this vast region--he murmurs to himself--is not gold or diamonds, but water. For lack of water the people perish, vegetation dies, and the land becomes a barren waste. Surely God has promised something far better than this.

Picking up his bible, he turns to a very familiar and favorite chapter, Isaiah 35, which declares:

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. . . . for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (Isa. 35:1, 6).

What an entrancing prospect to one who, like Robert, was by trade a gardener! "But I am here"--he mused--"not only to plant gardens in physical soil but also, and chiefly, to plant gardens in the souls of men, around the great Fountain of divine Grace, to which all may come freely and where the supply is never exhausted." Falling on his knees he poured out his soul in supplication: "Precious Lord, look down in compassion upon Thy servant and upon this wretched land. If I die, it is unto Thee. And if I live, use me to plant Thy garden in the wilderness, where multitudes may slake their thirst at the Fountain of Living water and find healing in the leaves of the Tree of Life."

This remarkable young man, who after three days of torment in the desert was finally rescued, was Robert Moffatt. He was born on the 21st of December, 1795, in East Lothian--a locality in Scotland closely bound up with the memory of the great John Knox and the sainted George Wishart, who was taken thence by night to be burned at the stake for his faith.

After several years of schooling and after running away to sea where he had many thrilling adventures, Robert was apprenticed at fourteen to learn the trade of gardener. And from this time until his death, August 10, 1883, at the age of 87, the story of his life is summed up in the history of six gardens.

THE GARDEN OF GRACE

Robert Moffatt was most fortunate in having parents who were devout Christians. When, just before his eighteenth birthday, he left his Scotch home to take a position as gardener at High Leigh in Cheshire, his mother insisted in walking with him to the Firth of Forth, where he was to take ship to England. With anxious concern over this son of hers who was faring forth into the world with an unconverted heart, she said: "Robert, I have one final request to make of you before we part. Will you promise me to read a chapter of God's Word every morning and another every night?" When he agreed she continued, "Now I shall return home with a happy heart. O Robert, my son, read much in the New Testament, especially the blessed Gospels. If you pray in deep sincerity, our Lord will teach you and lead you to Himself."

Every evening Robert retired to his garden lodge and pondered over the Scriptures. Through the day as he worked in the garden one question kept harassing him. It was the question which, according to Gladstone, is the only transcendent question, namely, "What

think ye of Christ?" One evening, as he was reading "the precious, undying Book of God, a renovation of light," he says, "entered my darkened soul." In Romans 3:22-26, he found:

- (1) Universal condemnation: "All have sinned" (v.23).
- (2) Universal propitiation: Redemption in Christ "unto all and upon all" (v.22).
- (3) Universal justification: "The justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (v.26).

The text also made its personal application. He states:

- (1) "I felt wretched . . . my sins piled up like a mountain, crushing me down." \
- (2) "I saw what God had done for the sinner-even this
- (3) "I saw what God requires of the sinner"-namely, to believe and receive the Lord Jesus Christ. Henceforth, through all the years, even down to his deathbed, his favorite song was: "Come Thou Fount of ev'ry blessing, Tune my heart to sing Thy grace."

His soul had quenched its thirst at the Fount of all blessing and "Streams of mercy, never ceasing" had transformed his barren heart into a Garden of Divine Grace.

THE GARDEN OF BEAUTIFUL DREAMS

On a certain lovely summer day toward sunset, Robert set out on foot for Warrington, a town about six miles away, to make a few purchases. As he hurried along with swift stride, he fell to dreaming of his future. He thought with fond satisfaction of a flattering new position which had recently been proffered him, a lad of only nineteen, and in fancy he pictured himself climbing to a position of wealth and fame before many years rolled by. Suddenly, on reaching Warrington, he found himself standing before a poster by the roadside and reading its message again and again:

MISSIONARY MEETING, GUILD HALL, WARRINGTON THURSDAY EVENING,
JULY 25 SPEAKER REV. WILLIAM ROBY, OF MANCHESTER

The date was already past and the meeting over, but Robert seemed rooted to the spot. Quickly his mind went back to the time when, along with his brothers and sisters, he used to sit before a roaring fire on winter nights listening to his mother tell exciting stories of Moravian missionaries taking the gospel to Greenland, the East Indies, and other distant places.

Presently, in the sanctuary of his soul, a Voice spoke: "Will you give up your plans for My plans? Are you willing to suffer that the heathen may be saved?" "Yes, Lord," he said aloud, and henceforth he was consumed with one master passion-to take the gospel to some far-away land of darkness.

Some time later Robert went to Manchester and asked Mr. Roby if he would assist him in securing an appointment under one of the missionary societies. This the earnest minister undertook to do, being much impressed by the young man's qualities. Desiring to have him close at hand so that he might give him special instruction in preparation for a missionary career, he secured for Robert a position as gardener with Mr. James Smith of Dukinfield. Mr. Smith and his wife were staunch and zealous Christians. Their only daughter, Mary, was a girl of radiant personality and genuine consecration. She had received her education in a Moravian school and, under the inspiration of the same missionary stories which Robert heard at his mother's knee, had formed a secret desire to be a foreign missionary.

It did not take Robert and Mary long to discover that they had much in common. When the daffodils were in bloom and the fragrance of lilacs filled the air, they would stroll through the garden, hand in hand, seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

Summer came and with it a message of startling import. Calling Mary into the garden, Robert said with evident excitement: "This letter tells that I have been accepted by the London Missionary Society and am to prepare to sail very soon. Will you go with me, Mary?" "I'd love to," she replied with a pounding heart, "but what will Father and Mother say?" When Robert broached the matter that night, Mr. Smith said, "My wife and I have no objection to your marriage, if you will stay in this country; but we will never agree to our only daughter going to some uncivilized land where she would suffer many hardships and, more likely than not, die an early death."

Thus there were many tears in their Garden of Beautiful Dreams, as the two lovers said goodbye; for, although their hearts ached sorely, they were agreed that Robert must go to his God-given work while she remained at home.

THE GARDEN OF AFRICANER

Robert Moffatt reached Cape Town, South Africa, January 13, 1817. After eight months devoted to language study he set out for the interior. On the way he stopped one night in the comfortable home of a Dutch or Boer farmer. After supper the farmer brought a Bible and requested Robert to hold a service for the family. Taking the Bible, Robert looked around the big room and said, "But where are the servants?"

"Servants? What do you mean?" inquired the farmer.

"I mean the Hottentots, of whom I have seen so many on your farm," rejoined Robert.

"Hottentots!" sneered the exasperated farmer. "If you're wanting a congregation, it would be better to go to the mountains and call the baboons! Or else I'll tell my sons to call in the dogs from the yard!"

Opening the Bible, Robert read the story of the Syrophoenician woman and placed special emphasis upon the words, "Yea, Lord, for even the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:22-28; Mark 7:25-30). Just then the old farmer interrupted: "If Mynheer will wait a little, he shall have the Hottentots." Later in the evening, the service being over, the Boer farmer said to his guest, "You took a hard hammer and you have broken a hard head."

As Robert neared the borders of Cape Colony he stopped overnight with another Dutch family. His new friends were alarmed to learn that he planned to go to the kraal [a village or collection of huts] of Africaner, the most feared and hated man in all South Africa. "I understand," said Robert, "that Africaner has come in contact with some missionaries and is not as ferocious as he used to be." But his host would not believe a word of it.

"Africaner will set you up as a mark for his men to shoot at!" declared the farmer.

"He will strip off your skin to make a drum to dance to and use your skull for a drinking cup!" warned his wife.

"If you were an old man, it would not be so bad," bewailed the old grandmother, wiping the tears from her eyes: "but I cannot bear to see such a young man going to be a prey to that monster!"

After nearly losing his life in the desert, Robert finally entered the kraal of Africaner, the outlaw chief, January 26, 1818. After looking the young missionary over and talking to him a few minutes, the chief seemed pleased and said to some women, "Build the missionary a house." Quickly a circle was formed, poles were thrust into the ground, mats were stretched and fastened, and in half an hour the hut was complete. There was one opening just large enough to crawl through, and this sufficed for door, window, and chimney. Here he lived in African simplicity, his food consisting principally of milk and dried meat.

Morning and evening Moffatt held a preaching service and during the day opened a school, which soon numbered over a hundred children. It was not long before the chief himself began to attend the services regularly. He also applied himself with zeal to the task of learning to read with proficiency. He would read his Testament hours at a time and often sat half the night on a rock near the missionary's hut, asking questions and discussing the great themes of God's love, Christ's atonement, and the wonders of heaven.

One day as they were talking, Africaner said, "Why were you staring at me just now?" "Knowing how gentle you are now," answered Robert, "I was trying to imagine how it could be true that you ever carried fire and sword and death through the country." For answer the once bloodthirsty chief wept like a child.

Every day there were fresh evidences of the reality of Africaner's conversion. Where formerly he robbed the weak, he now ministered to their needs. He who once exulted in war, was now a peacemaker. Often he would stand between tribes on the verge of fighting and say, "Of all the wars I fought and all the cattle I took, what have I now but shame and remorse?"

The young missionary rejoiced in the progress being made among Africaner's people, but at his heart a secret sorrow was gnawing. He was lonely. For almost a year he had not seen a white face. More than that, he was as deeply in love as ever with Mary Smith of Dukenfield. Anxiously he waited, hoping for a letter with an encouraging message. Finally there came a letter from Mary, written in agony of heart, telling him that further hope was useless, since her parents seemed more opposed than ever to her going to Africa. With burning tears on his cheeks Robert writes, "In my suffering I am cheered with this one recollection that it is for Jesus' sake and the salvation of the heathen."

One day Moffatt made the astounding proposal that Africaner accompany him on a journey to Cape Town. At first the chief declined, fearing that the government would put him to death for crimes he had committed in the Colony. But Moffatt reassured him by saying, "I want you to go as a living testimony of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus. When people see how changed you are, they will rejoice and praise God. At any rate, I shall see to it that they do not harm you."

Putting his life in the young missionary's hands, Africaner agreed to go. After several weeks' travel by cart, they came to a Dutch home where Moffatt had been entertained fifteen months earlier. "Who are you?" inquired the farmer. "I am Moffatt, Have you forgotten me?" "Moffatt!" stammered the man, shrinking back. "It is your ghost! Everybody says you were killed by Africaner. One man told me he had seen your bones."

After convincing the man that he was no ghost, Moffatt related the facts concerning Africaner's conversion and concluded, "He is a real Christian now." "That would be the eighth wonder of the world," replied the Dutch farmer. "If what you say is true, I have just one wish and that is to see him before I die. Although he killed my uncle, I would like to see him and talk with him."

"You shall have your wish sooner than you think," answered Moffatt. "The man standing over there is Africaner." The farmer drew back and stared at him. Then lifting up his eyes he said reverently, "Oh, God, what a miracle of Thy power!"

Moffatt and Africaner created a tremendous stir in Cape Town. The governor, Lord Somerset, gave Africaner a wagon worth eighty pounds and the whole city turned out to see the famous outlaw, whose life was such convincing evidence of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

While in Cape Town Moffatt met two representatives of the London Missionary Society. Although greatly impressed by his work with Africaner's tribe, they decided he should move to a larger field among the Bechwana tribes on the Kuruman river. It was hard for Moffatt to tell his friend of this decision. Two strong men wept the day Africaner started alone on the long journey back to his people, but both rejoiced that in the heart of the erstwhile savage chief there grew a garden of the Lord's own planting.

THE GARDEN OF HEART'S EASE

Four days after reaching Cape Town Moffatt had received astounding news. Mary Smith's parents had suddenly relented and Mary was expecting to arrive in Cape Town in December. What a day of bliss it was when a voice sweeter than music sounded in Robert's ears and Mary stood before him, as fresh and lovely as when he first saw her in a Cheshire garden! On the 27th of December they were married, and several days later three ox-carts stood ready for the wedding journey of seven hundred miles to the new station at Lattakoo. Though Mary was far away and had many dangers to face, her aging parents could well trust her to the care of Robert Moffatt who wrote: "Your beloved daughter's arrival was to me nothing less than life from the dead. Although in a land of strangers, she is under the care of our ever-present God, and united to one who speaks as he feels when he promises to be father, mother, and husband to Mary, and will never forget the sacrifice you have made in committing to his future care your only daughter."

Jolting along at the rate of fifteen miles a day, it took eight weeks to complete the journey to Lattakoo. Robert and Mary Moffatt had at last reached their African home. In the savage world around them there would be many trials, but theirs was the solace of an unfailing love and they could always find peace at home in the Garden of Heart's Ease.

THE GARDEN OF THORNS

The village of Lattakoo was protected from wild beasts and other enemies by a thick hedge of brambles. Stout, sharp thorns grew in profusion upon the bushes, aptly called the "wait-a-bit thorns." These thorn bushes became symbolic in the lives of the brave Scotch missionaries. They found themselves caught in a tangle of misunderstanding and contention, as prickly and impenetrable as the hedge of thorns. Many times they were severely pricked by the thorns of disappointment, of physical suffering, and of soul agony, but in the remembrance of our Lord and of His thorns, they found strength and consolation.

They had been married only a year when Mary was stricken so low, every breath seemed to be her last. With tortured face Robert stayed by her bedside, listening to her whispered messages of farewell. At last she rallied. Then a few weeks later she entered another valley of crisis and came out holding in her arms a baby girl called by her own name.

Many problems and perils invaded the Moffatt home. Often their hut was crowded to suffocation by uninvited visitors, who talked in loud tones or stretched out on the mud floor for a nap. Unless closely watched, deft fingers would pick up objects of value or of interest. Knives, spoons, saws, axes, and other tools disappeared with magic swiftness, especially if the family were away and the hut left unguarded. At the close of almost every day, as Robert says, "We had some tale to tell about our losses, but never about our gains, except those of patience and faith in the unchangeable purposes of God."

Services were held regularly in the chapel, but few attended and most of these seemed totally unconcerned. Indeed there was a rising tide of hostility among the people. For many months no rain had fallen in this area. Springs dried up, crops would not grow, and cattle were dying of hunger and thirst. Reduced to dire straits, the chief, Mothibi, sent for a rain-maker. Although this dignitary exhausted his bag of tricks and sacrificed many cattle, the rain did not come. Finally, he declared that the presence of the white missionaries was scaring the rain clouds away. A great crowd soon gathered and hurled curses at the missionaries. In the door of the cottage close by stood Mrs. Moffatt, the baby in her arms, praying as she watched her husband face the excited mob. The chief, with eyes blazing and a spear trembling in his uplifted hand, announced that the missionaries must leave at once or suffer violent consequences. With the courage of one ready for martyrdom, Robert Moffatt looked the chief in the eye and gave his answer: "You may thrust your spear into my breast. You may burn our house or shed blood. But we will not flee, for God has sent us and we are here to love and serve you in His name." Mystified by such fearlessness, the chief turned away and the mob dispersed.

His heart afire with the message of salvation, Moffatt made many long preaching trips, almost constantly in peril from wild beasts, wild men, hunger, thirst, and invisible microbes. On one occasion he staggered into Griqua Town unable to speak, after three days and two nights in the burning wilderness without food or water. But the thorn which cut deepest was the seeming utter failure to reach the people for Christ. Trying months lengthened into weary years with no sign of response. Often did the missionaries prostrate themselves before their "covenant God," beseeching Him to deliver them from the Garden of Wait-a-Bit Thorns.

THE GARDEN OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

The water supply being very scant in Lattakoo, they moved the mission to Kuruman, eight miles distant. Moffatt was working hard on the language, first reducing it to written form, then preparing a spelling book and translating portions of Scripture. Several buildings were erected and ditches were dug, conducting water from the river to the gardens, which were soon blooming in the valley. "These gardens are symbolic," said Robert to Mary. "Some day this spiritual desert shall blossom into a garden for God." Mary's faith was no less steadfast. One day a letter came from a friend in England, asking

what gift she could send that would help the missionaries. "Send us a communion set," Mary wrote; "we shall want it some day."

A communion set, when as yet there is not a single convert! A communion set, when as yet there is not a sign of encouragement. "Send us a communion set, we shall want it some day!" Will such faith go unrewarded?

With startling rapidity a miraculous change came over the people. As the missionary preached he saw that the people were listening with reverent and eager hearts, and frequently there were tears on the black faces before him, while sobs of contrition and cries for mercy arose from all sections of the audience. The chapel could not begin to hold the throngs, and, wonder of wonders, the very people who formerly considered manual labor disgraceful, now volunteered to go long distances for timber and to erect a new church with their own hands. They gave themselves to prayer and song, and a number of earnest converts were baptized. The first Sunday in July, 1829, marked an epoch in the Bechwana mission. In the presence of a mighty throng six natives were baptized, and then, as the climax of the day, the Christians sat down together to observe the Lord's Supper for the first time. On the very day preceding, Mary had received a package containing the communion vessels for which she had asked two years earlier.

After an absence of 23 years, Moffatt returned to England to supervise the printing of the New Testament in the language of the Bechwanas. His messages were used of God to stir up a great tide of missionary interest and to turn many young lives toward darkened lands beyond the sea. One of these was David Livingstone.

Returning to Africa, Moffatt rejoiced to see that the evangelistic movement was going deeper as well as extending over wide areas. He divided his time between writing, translating, and itinerant preaching. After 30 years of arduous labor he completed the translation of the entire Bible. "When I had finished the last verse," he says, "a feeling came over me as if I should die. I fell upon my knees and thanked God for His wonderful grace in giving me strength to accomplish my task."

Having completed his tasks below, Robert Moffatt looked forward to new and greater tasks above. Having left behind him a Garden for God in the African desert, he turned his eager face toward the Garden of Paradise, confidently expecting the Keeper thereof to greet him at the open gate: "Well done, thou good and faithful gardener. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

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